





BORN DEAD

Baby defies odds after traumatic delivery

story by LORI ARNOLD

photos by HEATHER K. PHOTOGRAPHY

Heather Hoffman was just hours from delivering her fourth child. She was nesting at home. Her husband Neil was vacuuming and doing some other final cleaning chores while they waited Heather's progression of labor, along with their midwife and doula.

Just as Heather had seen in a vision six years earlier, the house was filled with laughter.

"I was drinking a green smoothie and walking laps in the hallway," she said. "I sensed the Holy Spirit in the sweetness of every moment. I actually kept joking that it seemed too fun to be real labor!"

Three hours later, Heather had nearly advanced to the pushing phase. The laughter stopped.

"There was intense pain," the El Cajon resident said. "I remember hearing 'popping.' It literally felt like my insides were ripping apart."

The midwife immediately recognized the signs. Her patient's uterus had ruptured. The baby's heart rate had dropped.

Neil called 9-1-1.

“Somehow in the chaos I was in a supernaturally peaceful state,” Heather said. “I had my eyes closed, expressionless, and emotionless on the bed. I had no idea how I was holding it together so well. I was in horrible pain and knew exactly what was going on and how bad it could be, but the best way I can describe it is I felt like I wasn’t really there.”

At the hospital she was rushed into emergency surgery for a C-section.

“I remember waking up in pain, asking for Ryden,” she said. “No one would answer me completely because I learned later that he was born dead. When I read his discharge summary later on, it said he was born gray and floppy. No heart-beat. No breath. They got his heart going but had to put a ventilator in to get him breathing.”

Doctors eventually broke the news.

“Ryden went 43 minutes without sufficient oxygen and suffered severely massive brain damage,” his mother said, adding that her newborn was transferred to another hospital where he could get the specialized critical care treatment he needed.

Despite her ruptured uterus, Heather was released from the hospital less than 24 hours after the ordeal. Doctors attributed her quick recovery to Ryden.

“The surgeon told us that it seemed one of the only reasons I did not die or bleed out was because, when he cut me open, Ryden’s head was completely blocking the tear,” she said.

The couple was told that even though she was minutes away from delivery when her uterus ruptured, “Ryden reversed and was positioned in such a way that literally saved my life.”

A parent’s nightmare

After her own release from the hospital, Heather headed across town to see the son who saved her life.



“Seeing Ryden completely lifeless in the NICU, hooked up to too many machines to count, then having to come home to a house with an empty crib, a dresser filled with pre-washed newborn clothes, and an oh-so-still baby swing with new batteries in it, was the worst, most painful night of my entire life,” she said.

Doctors offered little hope for Ryden’s survival. Scans showed catastrophic brain damage and his body language mirrored the diagnosis. He couldn’t breathe on his own, he didn’t move or respond to pain, he had no reflexes and wouldn’t gag or swallow. His eyes remained open for hours without blinking.

“Ryden was a dead baby with a heart beat,” his mother said. “Picturing myself boxing up his unused newborn clothes, tearing apart the crib we built for him, a tiny casket, it all hurt so deep it was painful to breathe.”

Even with the grief and uncertainty, Heather said they both felt tremendous peace, a supernatural peace, throughout their journey, much like she had during the traumatic delivery at home. She also clung to the promises of Ephesians 6:10, “*Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.*”

“It was such a relief not needing to muster up my own strength to face each day and all its uncertainties, I needed only to rely on His strength, and His grace ... His power really was perfected in my weakness,” she said.

“There would be times I’d be at home doing dishes or laundry, and suddenly the Presence of God would come into

that room so thick I’d be unable to stand. I’d fall on my knees crying and worshipping, so grateful He was bearing this with us.”

The environment at the hospital was the same. Nurses told the Hoffmans that they requested assignment to Ryden’s room because there was a presence there that was not felt anywhere else in the hospital.

Expecting victory

Early on, the Hoffmans said they saw one of two victories for Ryden.

“The first victory being that we get a miracle and Ryden can come home and live life with the ability to grow in his love and knowledge of the Lord,” his father, the college pastor at Foothills Christian Church in El Cajon, said in a blog post on Facebook. “The second victory being that he gets to go Home to be with his Heavenly Father where there is no pain, suffering, or damaged body or brain. We trust God for whatever victory He wants to bring.”

That trust was tested several weeks after Ryden’s birth after more scans showed the newborn to be in a vegetative state.

“We decided to put Ryden in God’s hands, literally, and let Him decide which victory we were going to have,” Heather said.

So Neil and Heather gathered their immediate family as they prepared to take Ryden off of life support. Ryden’s older brothers, Gavin, 6, Josiah, 4, and Landon, 3, took turns holding their baby sibling, each giving him a special



toy they had picked out. In the background, a photographer friend snapped photos of Ryden, who, for the first time since his birth, was no longer hooked up to tubes.

“We had worship music playing,” Heather said. “Neil prayed a prayer of dedication and worship, and as the Holy Spirit engulfed the room, they took the ventilator out and placed my frail, dying son in my arms. Neil cradled his arms around me and Ryden as we wept. I looked at my baby’s lifeless, tiny face completely free from tubes and machines as he barely wheezed, and told him, ‘You can go. You can go, Ryden. We’ll see you again. Aren’t those gates pretty?’”

“We cried, rocked him, I sang worship songs to him, and his wheezing ever so very slowly, turning into breathing. After a few minutes, for the first time, Ryden was breathing on his own. God literally breathed the breath of life into him. Hours later we were still holding this precious baby, trying to soak in what was happening.”

As the music played in the background, Heather said two phrases from back-to-back songs merged together into one bold promise she claimed that day: Death is swallowed up in victory. So let Hope rise.

“And that’s exactly what happened,” she said.

Home with hospice

After defying doctors by willing to live, a still-frail Ryden was sent home with hospice care and the Hoffmans adjusted their schedule to accommodate Ryden’s

need for round-the-clock attention.

“We dared to invest in loving him, knowing it would hurt even worse if and when he died,” Heather said. “Those first couple weeks home were very hard and emotional. Within a couple weeks of bringing our baby home to die, he started to live.”

Again defying the predictions of doctors, Ryden learned how to gag and swallow. He began moving his limbs and reaching other milestones that his physicians believed he would never do.

An MRI when he was six months old stunned his mom and dad—and the neurosurgeons.

“The results showed that the struc-

ture of his brain was completely there in its entirety,” his ecstatic mom said. “There was no shrinkage, no water, no atrophy! It was a miracle!”

A week later, though, Ryden developed Infantile Spasms, which resulted in as many as 20 spasms a day and reversed much of the progress their son had made.

“I refused to feel hopeless,” Heather said. “I remember telling my friends that the wonderful week before he started having spasms when we enjoyed his interactions with us so thoroughly, I believe were to give us hope to get us through this massive setback; to help us remember and claim the son we were go-





Answering the **WHYS**

Neil Hoffman was home caring for his three oldest sons, Gavin, 5, Josiah, 3, and Landon, 2, while his wife Heather was at the hospital with their newborn Ryden. Dad had just put his children to bed when he found himself on the kitchen floor.

“I remember breaking down and crying out to God saying, ‘Why are you allowing this to happen?’” he said. “I love you God. Nothing is going to change my love for you. Nothing will change. You have stolen my heart.”

He begged God for an explanation on why Ryden was facing catastrophic brain damage after his mother’s uterus ruptured during the home birth. The grieving Dad wanted to understand the whys so that he could be strong for his family.

At that moment, a text arrived from friend.

“It wasn’t just an encouraging text, I’m telling you it was the very voice of God that hit my heart,” Neil said. “It read, ‘The hardest part about surrendering is our need to understand, but you can’t fully surrender until you say, ‘God, I don’t need to understand.’”

Neil’s mind immediately flashed to Isaiah 55:9:

As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

After receiving the text, Neil said he realized that God was asking him to “Trust in me and not in the ways I work, not in what you expect me to do, because I am not limited in what you expect me to do. I have much better things.”

“When I did that all of a sudden my eyes were open. Fear and worry and brokenness started breaking off of me and I was able to see things so different.”

Heather had her own encounter with the Lord after asking Him what her son would have been like without brain damage?

“What would his personality have been like?” she asked her maker.

“The Lord spoke to me firmly and strongly, yet lovingly, saying, ‘Don’t you, the clay, say to me, the Potter, ‘Why did You make this vessel this way?’ I make my vessels with a purpose. So don’t you look around at all these other vessels and say, ‘Why isn’t mine like that?’ Because this one has a different purpose. This boy, with this body and this mind, was created to do exactly what I want him to do. That’s why he is this way.’”

“From that moment on I experienced a freedom I’ve never known before. We absolutely believe there never was any other Ryden Joshua, that this is the life that our sovereign, perfect God had purposed this precious boy to live.” ■

ing to have again.”

The day they sent out an urgent plea for prayers on Facebook, the spasms ceased.

Birthday milestone

In May, the Hoffmans hosted a celebration gathering at the church to mark Ryden’s first birthday, a milestone doctors never thought the family would see. Heather and Neil used the time to thank those who served the family through prayer and other practical ways. The family continues to celebrate the strength of their son while monitoring his many developmental achievements.

“Ryden loves to play,” his mom said. “He has favorite toys and people. He loves to coo at us and he giggles at his brothers. His favorite song is ‘Jesus Loves Me.’ He’s a pro at rolling over. He thinks it’s funny when we brush our teeth. He loves baths and car rides and hates cold wipes.

“He has forms of cerebral palsy. He doesn’t eat like he’s supposed to, crawl, walk, or talk, but we believe he will. Our therapists say it seems like he’ll be able to do pretty much everything other little boys do.”

Looking forward

Although the extent of Ryden’s long-term disabilities is not yet clear, his parents are confident that he will continue to make strides, after asking the Lord that if their son was going to live that God would at least allow him to grow in love and the knowledge of the Lord.

“Without that we didn’t see ‘abundant life’ as possible,” Heather said. “We believe he’ll have disabilities, but we don’t see them as some horrible thing we’re stuck with and just have to get through. We see them as a platform to make him a little more visible so that Christ shines

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out all the more because we believe we're still in the beginning stages of Ryden's healing.”

In fact, she's had a vision of college-aged Ryden limping across a church stage to give his testimony. He's holding a microphone while pictures of him in the hospital NICU flash on screens behind him. He tells the crowd, “My name is Ryden Joshua Hoffman. I was born dead, and this is my story.”

“People can call that living in denial, but I'm going to call it walking by faith, because I believe that's how God's called me to live,” Ryden's mom said. “And I'd way rather get out of the boat and walk on water, even just for a little bit before sinking and crying out to Jesus to save me, as opposed to sitting in the boat not having any faith to do anything at all.”

Her husband agreed.

“I don't see a poor life that could

have been,” he said. “What Heather and I see is God moving through someone so strong. We see a little boy that has done more for the Kingdom of God than many people do their entire life.”

He said even in the early days of his son's life, Ryden was already driving people young and old around the globe to drop to their knees in prayer.

“Ryden is teaching little kids how to pray,” he said. ■



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